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AUTHOR Hart, Andrew
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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the essential task of English Teachers, since the debut of the National Curriculum English, is not to make qualitative distinctions between literary and media texts nor to place them on some form of hierarchical scale. Media reading should be on equal footing with written literature reading; both involve active engagement with institutions. Rather, the aim should be to help students learn how to evaluate for themselves any kind of text according to content and context. Issues surrounding imaginative engagement with texts are examined, and the threats imposed by dangerous texts, such as video "nasties" and comics, or by unchallenging complacent texts are discussed. New methods are reviewed in which the development of literary response can be deployed with media texts with ease. The purpose of the National Curriculum English Attainment Target 2 (Reading) (Levels 5-10) is presented, and the impact of television soap opera dramas on audiences, particularly children, is highlighted. Non-literary texts must be as accepted as challenging for readers as literary texts. (Contains 23 references.) (NAV)

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Reading Media Texts: Media, Imagination and National Curriculum English

Andrew Hart

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Reading Media Texts: Media, Imagination and National Curriculum English

Andrew Hart

Whilst Prince Charles and others have complained about the threats to our literary heritage which National Curriculum English poses, many teachers are concerned, on the contrary, that its assumptions about reading are far too traditional. The Statements of Attainment invoke the familiar concepts of attentiveness, fluency, expressiveness, inference and personal response as being central to reading literary texts for enjoyment and understanding. But when "non-literary and media texts" are discussed, there is an implicit assumption that some form of rhetorical conspiracy is at work. Suddenly, reading becomes a defensive strategy against the manipulations of the mass media. In spite of the fact that "reading" is now often used metaphorically to refer to viewing and listening processes, the architects of National Curriculum English would apparently prefer the word to be used only in relation to **written** texts.

It is almost as if texts demand completely different critical approaches according to whether they are factual or fictional. According to this simple view, facts are things which have happened and fiction is something which has been made (up). Facts are "out there" waiting to be reported and reflected on. The epistemological and philosophical problems which this common sense view ignores are vast. It is not my intention to discuss them here, but I do want to suggest some of the possibilities for looking at fictional media texts in the same way and for the same reasons as literary texts.

I want to argue that our essential task as English teachers is not to make qualitative distinctions between literary and media texts nor to place them on some form of hierarchical scale: rather, to help students learn how to evaluate for themselves any kind of text according to content and context. To illustrate this, we shall first examine some of the issues surrounding imaginative engagement with texts, then discuss some of the threats posed to children by "dangerous" texts (like "video nasties" and comics) or by unchallenging, complacent ones (like *Neighbours*) and finally look at ways

in which new methods for developing literary response can easily be deployed with media texts.

The National Curriculum Attainment Targets place great stress on the need for students to distinguish between facts and opinions. This concern seems to derive from a model of media texts as inherently deceptive and manipulative, as may be seen from the following selection:

National Curriculum English Attainment Target 2 (Reading) (Levels 5-10)

Pupils should be able to...

5c show in discussion that they can recognise whether subject-matter in non-literary and media texts is presented as fact or opinion....

6c show in discussion and in writing that they can recognise whether subject-matter in non-literary and media texts is presented as fact or opinion, identifying some of the ways in which the distinction can be made....

7c show in discussion that they can recognise features of presentation which are used to inform, to regulate, to reassure or to persuade, in non-literary and media texts....

8c show in discussion and in writing an ability to form a considered opinion about features of presentation which are used to inform, reassure or persuade in non-literary and media texts....

9c show in discussion and in writing an ability to recognise techniques and conventions of presentation in non-literary and media texts, and judge the effectiveness of their use....

10c show in discussion and in writing an ability to evaluate techniques and conventions of presentation in non-literary and media texts, and judge the effectiveness of their use....

10d select, retrieve, evaluate and combine information independently and with discrimination, from a comprehensive range of reference materials, making effective and sustained use of the information.

(DES 1990: 3-11)

Knowing about the context of production and consumption of texts is a necessary basis for understanding how to read them. The fact that texts are constructed rather than discovered is central to the process of reading.

> In the arrangement of the image, in the re-shooting, in the intervention of the director and the cameraman to place and to move elements within the frame, according to some unspecified and perhaps unconscious rhetoric, [images] have to speak and to emphasise an aspect of that reality which is claimed to be significant. (Silverstone 1985: 77)

All media texts depend in some way on pre-determined scripts, whether they are formalised on the page or only floating in producers' heads. But the dependence of different media forms on scripts varies. In fact, we can think of the apparent opposites of fact and fiction as existing on a continuum rather than as mutually exclusive opposites.

In television and radio, for example, news is at one (re-active) extreme and drama at the (pro-active) other. Most documentaries are pre-scripted to the extent that they use fictional techniques of presentation to dramatise factual information. Even when this is not so, documentary makers inevitably approach their subjects with their own agendas and structures, even though they might be unaware of them. The extent to which this happens in news has been the subject of great debate over the last twenty years, as the work of the Glasgow University Media Group testifies. Advertising is a highly pre-scripted form but because it also claims to be "reporting" and offering information about products and services, it also has some of the surface features of documentary.

Ironically, the media themselves confuse the issue by going to great lengths to distinguish factual information from opinion. They also use all sorts of familiar codes to signal when they are dealing with facts. On television, features like Standard English speech, smart clothing and electronic office hardware all assert that we are in the presence of responsible and reliable reporting rather than the realms of fiction or political propaganda. "There is no fraudulence here.... It cannot be otherwise" (Silverstone 1985: 77).

Selectivity and editing are inherent in any act of perception or narration. This can be easily demonstrated by listening to how people describe things or relate events. Their personalities, interests and immediate contexts play a large part in determining what is left out, what is put in and how it is ordered. But when the media report information something else is also happening. There are additional levels of editing which are not directly dependent on the personal views and contexts of reporters. Written journalism often shows traces of the way personality is stamped on stories and newspapers have acknowledged political stances which are usually shared by their readers. Indeed, the politics of newspapers remain a very significant factor in readers' purchasing decisions.

The reasons for the particular emphases on certain kinds of reading can be interestingly traced back to the politics of the Education Reform Act of 1988 and the motivations behind the National Curriculum. The questions which the Cox Report proposes as central to the study of any text ("who is communicating with whom and why; how has the text been produced and transmitted; how does it convey its meaning?" [DES 1989 7.23]) are questions which we should be asking about the National Curriculum itself.

When Kenneth Baker was Secretary of State for Education, he wrote a short article (*Sunday Times*, 28 February 1988) which clearly expressed his own views about children, fiction and imagination. He noted with pleasure that Shakespeare is alive and well in theatres, on television, on video and on radio up and down the land. But he argued that none of this could compare with **reading** Shakespeare.

Kenneth Baker's prejudices about non-literary media are worth noting more fully, since they are still shared by many others, including some teachers.

> Children watch too much television... I find this depressing. Literature, the reading of good books, is in many important ways a superior, richer and deeper experience than watching television. A particular feature of the written or spoken word is the unique demand it makes upon the imagination. (Baker 1988)

There is no doubt that television is the most popular medium amongst children. There are currently about 9 million four to fifteen year-olds (about 17% of the population) but at peak viewing times they constitute a third of the total audience. This pattern varies according to the season. In Winter, for example 74% of four to seven year-olds are watching at 4pm on weekdays, while only half that number watch at the same time in Summer. Children between four and twelve watch an average of five programmes each day and within this age-band, the heaviest viewing is by seven to nine year-olds in families from social classes D and E. As children get older, they watch less television and, for some reason, develop a preference (most pronounced amongst male viewers) for BBC programmes (Wober 1986).

The pervasiveness of television in society is also mirrored in schools. Over 98% of primary and 99% of secondary schools have at least 1 colour television: 78% & 99% have VCRs (BBC 1987). So even though some of the traditional hostility to television amongst teachers may remain, perhaps attitudes are changing (Davies 1989: 119). Whatever an ideal curriculum might prescribe, we have to face the fact that children experience a wide range of media texts, most of which are encountered outside the classroom. This fact needs to be recognised in what and how we teach.

No-one would deny the importance of imagination or its potential engagement through literature. But it is a matter of degree, not kind. All media experiences involve children in imaginative work, whether as readers, viewers, listeners, speakers or writers. As the Cox Report reminds us, "children construct the world through story" (DES 1989: 7.1).

Children and media: dangerous liaisons?

> Audiences are not the passive victims of scheduling decisions, and they do discriminate, often in very discerning ways, between different examples of the same genre. (Buckingham 1987: 4)

All three of Britain's major soaps are broadcast during family viewing hours before the 9 o'clock "watershed". They all (particularly *Neighbours*) have some appeal for children. They all depend on the imaginative involvement of viewers. But soaps are not all the same and their different

appeals are reflected in the composition of their audiences. One third of the *Neighbours* audience, for example, is 15 or under.

Recent public discussion of children and television in Britain has been dominated by fear of television's potentially harmful effects. The group of teachers who reported to the DES in 1983 were worried that children routinely watched adult programmes containing incidents and values which might be considered harmful to them.

Debate has been quickened by hysteria over so-called "video nasties" which led to the 1984 Video Recordings Act. Similarly, concern about changes in the structure of broadcasting in Britain (especially the role of satellite and cable) has produced the Broadcasting Standards Council. Whilst Kenneth Baker has been concerned with the alleged failure of television to engage the imagination and make demands on children, others have been worried about the dangers of their imaginations being over-involved. This is particularly so with erotic and/or violent material, especially when it is experienced in a normally protected domestic context. The dangers arise, it is argued, because of the special power of visual imagery and the degree of imaginative involvement it produces: children identify with, absorb and imitate the behaviour they see on television. As a result, their own characters and the general social and cultural life of their society are damaged.

> The excessive time spent on watching television creates a situation similar to that of a child living on a diet of one single food such as meat pies or chicken. Whereas meat pies and chicken are good foods when integrated into a complete, nutritious diet, when eaten exclusively they do not provide the variety of nutrients needed for healthy development. Similarly, if children spend most of their leisure time simply watching television, no matter how good the programmes, their growth will be stunted because they are not getting the rich variety of experiences and activities which are necessary for healthy physical, psychological and mental development. (Horsfield 1986: 53)

Arguments about effects have been running for decades and have never been satisfactorily resolved. Most recently, in the debate over "video

nasties", researchers like Cumberbatch and Barker have shown how careful we need to be in accepting some of the findings of of people like Clifford Hill and his colleagues (Barker 1984a, 1984b; Cumberbatch 1989; Hill 1985). The Parliamentary Group Video Enquiry (whose title implied but did not carry any Parliamentary authority) suggested that large numbers of very young children were being harmed as a result of watching "video nasties". But their methods and data were unreliable. Much of their work was based on problem families listed by the NSPCC. They also relied on self-completed questionnaires which allowed children to claim they had seen non-existent videos. And their use of those titles reported to the Director of Public Prosecutions as a means of categorising "video nasties" (even though many of these had not been prosecuted, let alone convicted) led them into some bizarre inclusions like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

> Most people (75%) think that there is more violence on television now than there was about ten years ago. However, most people are mistaken. Violence and concerns about violence have clearly increased in society in the last decade but this has not been reflected by a proportional increase on television.... (Cumberbatch 1987: 41)

There is a danger of children being exposed to potentially disturbing situations which they are unable to understand and cope with. But there is a greater danger of assuming the existence of effects which are not demonstrable, of ignoring other relevant variables and of making television the scape-goat for all society's ills. We have to ask what consequences we could reasonably expect to occur if television could somehow be magically removed from the calculation.

> Television is not all-powerful. It can provide examples of some of life's possibilities for children. It can give them ideas for play and satisfy some of their curiosity for knowledge. But it cannot play for them. Similarly, it can show them how other people, including "bad" people, behave, but it cannot bring them up to be nice or nasty people. Only families and communities can do that. (Davies 1989: 28)

There are undoubtedly large variations in individual learning styles and strategies. It is therefore important to relate the study of children's responses to television more closely to relevant general theories of learning. These would then provide a sounder basis for conducting effective research.

If we think of the viewing process as an interactive one, we can shift the focus away from medium and message towards children as viewers. We can see children as active participants in the making of meaning. Meaning becomes the product of an interaction between programmes and viewers rather than a fixed property of the programmes. Traditional effects research focuses on audiences as passive objects. But this approach emphasises the role of audiences as informed subjects who respond actively to what they see.

Some researchers have found that children's responses are active, thoughtful and sophisticated (Palmer 1986; Hodge and Tripp 1986).

> They act like it's really happening, they get really into what they're acting... they don't just stand there and say something... They act it and they sort of feel it, and so you feel it as well, so you get into the show with them. (Annette [11] on *Sons and Daughters* in Palmer 1986: 42-3)

The Cox Report recognised the importance for children of interacting with texts and that reading should therefore be tied in with other forms of active response.

> Children should experiment... with dramatic improvisations of the stories they read and write; they should experience and take part in the performance of poetry; they should listen critically to radio plays. (DES 1989: 7.8)

But to imagine that more than a handful of young people are listening to radio plays is at best wishful thinking and at worst naive. Young people's use of radio is largely confined to listening to popular music presented by fast talking DJs. This kind of radio is not generally seen as presenting the range of fictional forms which we have noted in television. And yet a closer

look at the schedules for Radio 1 or an average local commercial radio station would reveal the use of a whole range of story forms which appear to have strong audience appeal. Programme trails, advertisements and public information campaigns often use short narrative forms to underscore their messages. And large audiences have been achieved by DJs, able to create a good running story as a back-drop to the records. Furthermore, many of the conventions of soap opera are used in one of Radio 1's most popular features *Our Tune*, where DJ Simon Bates extemporises tales of tragedy and romance woven from letters sent in by listeners. *Our Tune* is a kind of "soap operetta" characterised by gossipy accessible language, careful scene-setting, detailed narration of dramatic moments, essential bridging passages and simple moralising. Such examples show how popular radio can provide a useful and easily accessible source of fictional forms. Understanding how these forms use the radio conventions of words, music, sounds and silence in order to stimulate the theatre of the mind, could be the starting point for more complex work on "reading" radio.

Popular television drama

> Most people spend more time watching various kinds of drama than in preparing and eating food. (Williams 1974: 59-60)

Fiction currently constitutes over 35% of peak-time television output. The "continuous serial" (now most often known as "soap opera", from the early days of American radio) has been one of the great popular successes of television. A total of about 80 million person-hours is spent watching soap opera each week.

Granada's *Coronation Street* has run for over 30 years and has only recently been matched in popularity by BBC's *EastEnders* and the imported *Neighbours*. Such serials are crucial for television companies because they reduce financial risks when compared with single plays or films. They are cheap to produce (because of savings made on recurrent settings and actors) and provide a constant supply of loyal viewers.

What is it that makes soaps so attractive to viewers? What special pleasures do they offer? Characterisation is limited mostly to "flat" serial

types from three generations, but with more individualised or "rounded" central characters. The stability of the communities they create, the predictability of plot developments and their recurrent transmission times (with omnibus repeats) are all important aspects of their appeal and help maintain audience loyalty.

Unlike documentaries and detective stories, soaps typically flatter viewers by inviting them to see themselves as "in the know", with a mastery of specialised social knowledge about characters and events in the serial. Another pleasure offered by soaps has been established only recently through observation of viewers in their own homes and detailed discussions with groups of viewers about television. That is the ease with which television can be used like radio as a secondary medium and allow partial attention to something else (Taylor and Mullan 1986: 154).

Soaps also benefit from their symbiotic relationship with the press. The tabloid newspapers currently employ more than more than forty journalists as full-time television reporters (Taylor and Mullan 1986: 177). As a result of their attentions, the lives of serial characters are publicised and amplified in the press. And the lives of the actors are implicated in a curious parallel world which is neither quite factual nor entirely fictional: "Always the same, always changing..." (Geraghty 1981: 22).

The appeal of continuous serials is mainly to the known and familiar. But there is much more to them than that. Surprise and suspense are also built into their narratives to raise curiosity and retain interest. Their success depends on a subtle blend of continuity with change. The televisual language of British soaps is very much based on naturalistic conventions.

They rely heavily on the context of the nuclear family in established domestic interiors or communal spaces like shops, pubs and cafes.

> The lighting is usually flat, without harsh shadows; the camerawork is generally static and unobtrusive, with close-ups and tracking shots used only rarely; the editing follows the rules of standard continuity editing.... (Buckingham 1987: 74)

EastEnders is more complex in its plotting than *Neighbours*. It also has a low frequency of dramatic incidents in comparison with other soaps, but still creates an impression of fast action and excitement. It does so by creating a density of texture in both its content and style. For example, it offers a multiplicity of characters and frequent shifts of location. It often refers backwards, forwards and sideways, not only to restate what viewers already know but make us "work harder" at reading the text. It has a higher than usual number of major simultaneous story-lines (5-6 on average compared with 3 in *Coronation Street* or *Brookside* and often less in *Neighbours*). The camera work is highly mobile and creates a sense of bustle which is sometimes restless and disturbing (like *Hill Street Blues* or *Making Out*). This business is also reinforced by the density of atmospheric background sound (again, in stark contrast with the suburban silence of *Neighbours*) (Buckingham 1987: 54-55).

Like other soaps, *EastEnders* creates a sense of life being lived at normal pace, in parallel with the audience's social experience. Its rhythm and continuity partly depend on a recurrent diurnal structure punctuated by pub opening hours and much meal-taking.

> There is a density of naturalistic detail in the background sound and in the design of sets and costumes, and a distinct lack of opulence. Above all, much of the action is resolutely mundane: the characters do their laundry, go shopping, cook and eat meals, go to the lavatory, take their dogs for walks and make endless cups of tea. (Buckingham 1987: 74)

Whilst some critics argue that soaps only deal with trivia, there can be no doubt that *EastEnders* engages with major social issues. Its very title and location depend implicitly on a concern with class. It constantly dramatises events which arise from the clash between a traditional working class community and the demands of a more diverse modern society. That society is also a multi-cultural one and so racial issues inevitably arise.

Yet, as with the representation of class, there is a lack of reference to broader structural inequalities. This results in the creation of an apparent oasis of multi-racial harmony. Whilst *Coronation Street* undoubtedly

explores different models of femaleness, *EastEnders* is more concerned with examining the traditional masculine roles.

Whatever particular concerns are addressed and however fluently they are blended into the daily life of Albert Square, the central questions are about **representation**. How are ambiguities, problems and conflicts actually dealt with in the programme? What overall views of social groups and the role of individuals within them emerge?

> To what extent does *EastEnders* seek to construct an artificially harmonious community, and thereby to efface fundamental differences and inequalities, particularly those based on class and ethnicity? (Buckingham 1987: 94)

In spite of the popularity of soaps, some critics maintain that their predictability and sentimentality are dangerous. Threats from outside are constantly repelled or neutralised by the internal stability and strengths of the dominant community and its appeal to "common sense". If familiar problems are resolved in an unchallenging way, the danger is that the solutions will be ones which maintain the *status quo*. So the characteristic structures of feeling and ideas will be conservative.

But it is not just the way that the characters are presented, the stories structured and the central problems resolved which raises questions about ideology. Equally important is what is **missing** from soaps. The absence of disturbing elements which may occur in actual social experience may be what gives some soaps like *Neighbours* their particular appeal for children. Yet we cannot be concerned simply with the apparent characteristics of television texts. We need to examine how audiences actually respond to them and make sense of them.

Reading and responding

> An active involvement with literature enables pupils to share the experience of others. They will encounter and come to understand a wide range of feelings and relationships by entering vicariously the world of others, and in consequence, they are likely to understand more of themselves. (DES 1989: 7.3)

The Cox Report is curiously ambivalent about non-literary fiction. It seems to assume, as we noted initially, that non-literary texts are dangerous or worthless. The reference to radio plays cited above is an isolated one. Why not consider seriously the non-literary fiction which we know most young people enjoy and respond to? There is no doubt that some childish (and adult) pleasures involve the consumption of formulaic, pulp-written material which is often mindless and sometimes potentially dangerous or disturbing. Such material cannot be ignored and yet the type of hysteria noted earlier, which the so-called "video nasties" provoked, is neither helpful nor appropriate. Learning how to make mature judgements about a range of fiction is an important part of growing up. Studying the media can help by encouraging students to develop a language through which they can begin to understand their own responses to texts.

So first of all we need to acknowledge the validity of young people's individual responses to fiction and to accept that, in the case of comics for example, these will differ from adult interpretations and vary from person to person. By experiencing fiction in this way young people begin to develop their own value systems. So good Media Education should provide an opportunity for students to talk about their understanding of media texts and to recognise the features of different kinds of material. In this way, students can develop their own evaluation of texts and a language through which to express it. The wider the range of material to which they are exposed, the greater their understanding is likely to be. Of course, at every age there are judgements to made about the appropriateness of material but these need to be thought out in a context which acknowledges the fact that children's individual tastes and pleasures vary and that their responses will almost always differ from adults.

Many studies have been carried out on how individual and small groups of children read and respond to writing. Reader-response approaches have provided many insights into reading processes and imaginative responses among children. These approaches have already been adopted in some schools as good classroom practice in the teaching of literature as well as being recognised formally within National Curriculum English (DES 1989: Appendix 6: "Approaches to the Class Novel").

Reader-response approaches are based on the notion that readers are active meaning makers who use a range of strategies (introspection, retrospection, anticipation) to travel in the "secondary worlds" of fiction. Every text offers "gaps" which readers are invited to explore and fill with their own speculations as the text unfolds. Every reader embarks on a journey of discovery which involves such processes as prediction, surprise, shock, accommodation, integration, disappointment and the satisfaction of fulfilled expectations.

Several techniques have been developed by researchers to record secondary responses to poems and fiction and some of them are also usable in the classroom. For example, readers can "map" their own reading routes, tape-record a running commentary on their reactions as they read, write notes around poems or draw diagrams. With novels, it can be done by stopping at pre-determined points to make jottings or record initial reactions to a sequence or make predictions about how the narrative is likely to develop. In addition, it is possible to extend this into group discussion or more extended and reflective personal writing.

There are clearly formal and presentational differences between writing and other media. Some researchers argue that these differences explain how and why attention is given or withheld.

> Like travel television narrows the mind.... The difference between television and literature is fundamental. When we read a book we enter into a secret intimacy with the author, an intimacy... between strangers. We form our own images in our heads. But when we watch television we all plug ourselves into our sets and collectively receive identical images. (Holroyd 1982)

Literature and television both rely on signs and codes which are apprehended visually (although television has a simultaneous and sometimes counterpointed auditory channel). Clusters of words on the page or patterns of dots on the screen are the material forms which generate meaning. But is there an essentially subjective imaging process which occurs in reading which does not occur in viewing? Does it actually matter that some of the signs used by television are already themselves

visual? All media allow some degree of freedom to choose what to attend to within the text, so that variations of response will occur. At the same time, it cannot be denied that audiences come to every media text with their personal memories, some of which are activated by viewing, listening or reading, so that meaning is inevitably a matter for negotiation which will differ between individuals.

There is no doubt that television narratives and other forms of popular fiction found in comics and magazines have a powerful formative influence on children's writing. If we want to know more about the sense which they make of soaps, for example, and how they incorporate them into their personal agenda, we can look carefully at the narratives they create for themselves. Frequently, children's writing shows the marks of derivation from television soaps. Some teachers will disapprove of writing based on soaps because they find it derivative. But the use of such models does not necessarily mean thoughtless reproduction of formula fiction or enslavement to a fixed set of values. Instead of making automatic assumptions about the inferiority of such forms, we could be helping children to write authentically by recognizing and understanding the codes and conventions which they draw upon.

Just as English has much to learn from Media Education, so too reader-response approaches can be effectively used with non-literary media. Recent studies have shown increasing critical powers amongst children who have been taught in a constructive way about media (Davies 1989: 131). The role of Media Education, like that of English, is to help children to enjoy a wide range of media and to be aware of how they work. We need to accept the validity of the specific meanings which young readers create through their reading of, for example, comics and magazines. Only then can they develop into readers who can make their own sophisticated judgements about texts. Ultimately, they should be able to speak independently and with confidence about the characteristic forms and pleasures of a whole range of different texts. This process necessarily involves them in becoming more active media readers and audiences. As they become increasingly able to create a critical distance between

themselves and the media texts they value, they are moving towards the kind of autonomy which is the main aim of Media Education.

> ... we should broaden our notions of what constitutes useful and interesting writing, and include within that writing based on popular fiction. Once we start to take [it] seriously, there would be other consequences for our practice. We could encourage children to articulate what they already know about how such fictions work and help to refine that knowledge.... This might involve using some of the critical strategies commonly associated with Media Studies, asking such questions as: How does this piece come to have meaning? What is its purpose, and how has it been produced? But we would do this for different reasons. Rather than using such questions to focus pupils' attention on how they are being manipulated or worked on by the text... the point would be to enable pupils to manipulate the rules of the text's construction for themselves. (Moss 1989: 117-18)

This call for a broadening of our understanding of writing is only minimally present in National Curriculum English, but it usefully reminds us of how closely reading and writing are related. For in the end, reading media, like reading literature, is not a passive absorption in or even interaction with texts, but an active engagement with institutions, as the definition of Media Education adopted by the Cox Report makes clear:

> Media Education... seeks to increase children's critical understanding of the media.... (It) aims to develop systematically children's critical and creative powers through analysis and production of media artefacts.... Media Education aims to create more active and critical media users who will demand, and could contribute to, a greater range and diversity of media products. (DES 1989: 9.6)

If one of the purposes of literature is to challenge readers to travel beyond themselves and, perhaps, to be disturbed into "critical thinking about existing stereotypes and values" (DES 1989: 7.4), there must also be a place for such challenge by non-literary texts. Reading, whatever the materials, should never be completely comfortable.

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